

Message Text

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ACTION ARA-10

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SAN SALVADOR 1402

LIMDIS

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: SHUM PINT PINS ES
SUBJ: DISCUSSION OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND ALLEGED POLITICAL PRISONERS
WITH PRESIDENT ROMERO

REF: SAN SALVADOR A-30

1. WITH SAN SALVADOR EFFECTIVELY CLOSED DOWN FOR HOLY WEEK, I VISITED PRESIDENT ROMERO IN THE PRACTICALLY DESERTED CASA PRESIDENCIAL FOR A FORTY-FIVE MINUTE DISCUSSION WHICH TURNED PRINCIPALLY UPON HUMAN RIGHTS AND ALLEGED POLITICAL PRISONERS.

2. AFTER INITIAL AMENITIES HAD BEEN DISPENSED WITH, I CONVEYED TO PRESIDENT ROMERO THE US ASSESSMENT OF THE 34TH SESSION OF THE UN HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION AS CONTAINED IN STATE 072085. I PARTICULARLY EMPHASIZED OUR DESIRE TO WORK WITH OTHER COUNTRIES TO STRENGTHEN EVEN FURTHER THE PROCEDURES AND CAPABILITIES OF THE UN FOR DEALING WITH HUMAN RIGHTS MATTERS.

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3. NEXT I BROUGHT UP THE ALLEGED EXISTENCE OF POLITICAL PRISONERS IN EL SALVADOR. HANDING THE PRESIDENT THE TWO-PAGE DOCUMENT RECENTLY BROUGHT TO OUR EMBASSY BY THE "COMMITTEE OF MOTHERS AND FAMILY MEMBERS OF POLITICAL PRISONERS, EXILES AND DISAPPEARED PERSONS IN THE COUNTRY" (SEE EMBASSY A-30, 3/16/78), I INVITED TO HIS ATTENTION THE FACT THAT THIS GROUP WAS NOW APPROACHING ALL EMBASSIES

IN SAN SALVADOR AND HAD MOST RECENTLY ANNOUNCED THAT IT WOULD PETITION THE NEWLY ELECTED LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY TO SUPPORT ITS REQUEST FOR AN AMNESTY. PRESIDENT ROMERO READ THE TWO-PAGE DOCUMENT AND COMMENTED THAT THE SAME GROUP HAD ALSO APPROACHED ALL POSSIBLE INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS SEEKING THEIR SUPPORT. I THEN SAID THAT THE POSITION OF THE UNITED STATES WITH RESPECT TO POLITICAL PRISONERS IS WELL KNOWN, THAT I REALIZED PRESIDENT ROMERO HAS ALREADY DENIED THAT HIS GOVERNMENT HOLDS ANY POLITICAL PRISONERS (SAN SALVADOR 5881), BUT THAT HOLY WEEK SEEMED AN AUSPICIOUS TIME FRAME IN WHICH TO EXPRESS THE STRONG HOPE THAT HUMANITARIAN AND CHRISTIAN SENTIMENTS WOULD BE APPLIED TO THE FULLEST EXTENT POSSIBLE IN THE CASE OF ANY DETAINEES WHO MIGHT FALL INTO THE CATEGORY OF "POLITICAL PRISONERS."

4. PRESIDENT ROMERO SAID THAT HE IS NOT AWARE OF ANY POLITICAL PRISONERS BEING HELD BY HIS GOVERNMENT. UPON TAKING OFFICE JULY 1, 1977, HE HAD TOLD HIS ASSOCIATES THAT POLITICAL PRISONERS ONLY BRING PROBLEMS AND HE WANTED NO SUCH COMPLICATIONS IN HIS ADMINISTRATION. TO HIS INQUIRY ABOUT THE EXISTENCE OF ANY SUCH PRISONERS, HEADS OF THE SECURITY SERVICES HAD RESPONDED NEGATIVELY. GESTURING TOWARD THE TWO-PAGE DOCUMENT, THE PRESIDENT SAID THAT IF ANY OF THOSE NAMED THEREIN HAD BEEN TAKEN PRISONER, IT MUST HAVE BEEN UNDER SOME ADMINISTRATION

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PRIOR TO HIS OWN. HE REMINDED ME THAT AS A CANDIDATE FOR THE PRESIDENCY HE HAD LAIN ASIDE HIS PORTFOLIO AS MINISTER OF NATIONAL DEFENSE IN MAY 1976 AND THEREFORE WAS NOT IN A POSITION TO KNOW ALL DEVELOPMENTS OCCURRING FROM THEN TO JULY 1, 1977. I REITERATED MY HOPE THAT IF THERE WERE ANY POLITICAL PRISONERS, OR IF ANY TURNED UP, THAT HUMANITARIAN PRINCIPLES WOULD PREVAIL.

5. OUR CONVERSATION THEN TURNED TO LAST WEEK'S VIOLENCE (MARCH 17) AND THE APPARENTLY INCREASING TENSION BETWEEN WOULD-BE DEMONSTRATORS AND SECURITY FORCES. THE PRESIDENT BEGAN TO SPEAK OF THE NEED FOR SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHANGE, PARTICULARLY IN THE COUNTRYSIDE. HE DEPLORED THE ANACHRONISTIC ATTITUDE OF THE OLDER LANDOWNERS AND RECOUNTED INCIDENTS OF REACTIONARY CHARACTER WHICH HE SAID ONLY CONTRIBUTE TO PEASANT RESENTMENT AND THE POTENTIAL FOR CONFRONTATION. HE SAID THAT SOME ADMINISTRATORS HAVE BEEN ARRESTED FOR SHORTCHANGING OF COFFEE PICKERS, AND HE DESCRIBED ONE INSTANCE IN WHICH HE PERSONALLY ACHIEVED FARM TO MARKET EGRESS FOR CAMPESINO GROWERS' WATERMELONS BY THREATENING TO HAVE THE GUARDIA NACIONAL TEAR DOWN A RECALCITRANT LANDOWNER'S BLOCKING FENCE.

6. EXPANDING UPON THIS SUBJECT, THE PRESIDENT TICKED OFF NAMES OF ABOUT TEN LARGE BUSINESSMEN AND LANDOWNERS WHOM HE TERMED "ENLIGHTENED" AS TO THE NEED FOR SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHANGE IF A DISASTER WERE TO BE AVERTED. THROUGH THESE PEOPLE, HE SAID, HE IS TRYING TO CONVINCE THE LANDHOLDING CLASS IN GENERAL THAT IT IS BETTER TO YIELD 20 PER CENT AND KEEP 80 PER CENT THAN TO RISK LOSING ALL. BUT IT IS VERY SLOW GOING. I ASKED IF THERE WERE TIME TO DO THIS BEFORE A "SOCIAL EXPLOSION" MIGHT OCCUR. PRESIDENT ROMERO SAID HE THOUGHT SO. WHEN I EXPRESSED GENERAL APPROVAL FOR THIS LINE OF APPROACH, THE PRESIDENT APPEARED TO TRY "TO RECRUIT" ME. HE SAID THAT I WAS IN A UNIQUE POSITION TO ASSIST, SINCE I ENJOYED THE CONFIDENCE OF MANY MEMBERS OF

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THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY. ANY SUPPORTIVE WORDS OF MINE, HE SUGGESTED, COULD BE DISPROPORTIONATELY HELPFUL.

7. AS OUR CONVERSATION DREW TO A CLOSE, I TOLD PRESIDENT ROMERO THAT I COULD ANTICIPATE CONSIDERABLE NEED FOR FUTURE DISCUSSION OF HUMAN RIGHTS PROBLEMS. SINCE IT IS NOT ALWAYS EASY, NOR APPROPRIATE, TO OBTAIN AN APPOINTMENT WITH THE PRESIDENT, I SUGGESTED THAT HE CONSIDER NAMING SOME OFFICIAL TO BE A READY POINT OF CONTACT ON HUMAN RIGHTS MATTERS. GIVEN THE CHARACTER OF THE PRESENT GOVERNMENT, I FURTHER SUGGESTED THAT IT MIGHT BE USEFUL IF THIS WERE A HIGH-RANKING MILITARY OFFICER. BUT MOST IMPORTANT, I SAID, IT SHOULD BE A PERSON OF THE PRESIDENT'S UTMOST TRUST AND CONFIDENCE. PRESIDENT ROMERO SAID THAT HE WOULD CONSIDER THIS SUGGESTION.

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